

## Narrative by Terry Benczik

### 9/11 Train Ride

It was a beautiful spring-like dawn and I woke up an hour earlier than usual thinking it might be a good idea to head into work and clear up the pile of papers on my desk. Yet somehow, in-between tugging on clothing and checking the early news on the Today Show, the morning seemed to be adhering to a clock of its own and I realized that I had to grab my briefcase and head out the door. I made sure to throw in something to read on the train so I could relax a bit during my hour-long commute. I was astonished that the morning had slipped away so quickly and as I was leaving, I resolved to stay late to get the paperwork done. There's a mailbox about 20 feet from my front porch and even though I sensed time was tight, sending in the warrantee for my new electric toothbrush seemed important enough to take an extra five seconds on the way to the car.

My train station in suburban New Jersey is in a beautiful setting. Near the parking lot there's a pathway to the train rail bridge that takes you past a Revolutionary War graveyard covered in tall old oak trees. It's peaceful there. But on this morning, my train was pulling into the station and I rushed past the cemetery, up the steps and dashed across the platform in time for the train doors to close in my face. Two train cars up, the conductor stepped out of the train to make one last check. Often, I've seen him hit a button and let passengers who missed the closing doors onto the train. But I guess he was running late too, and didn't let me on.

I read a lot of spiritual literature and made a joke to myself, thinking, "God, I know there's a reason for everything, but why do I have to be late for work this morning?" I smiled to myself, fully expecting never to get an answer and once again considered those impatient papers that were waiting on my desk.

## Library of Congress

I sat down knowing that the next train would arrive twenty minutes later and pulled out some text I was reading to learn a bit about Eastern philosophy. It explained principles of Eastern thought by examining parallel concepts in Western beliefs.

Quite silently, as I was reading, a woman sat down next to me and began reading over my shoulder. "That's very nice," she said, indicating the pages I was reading. She explained that she enjoyed such literature. After we talked a little about the essay, she told me her name.

"I am Mathangi," she smiled and said she was glad to have someone to talk to while waiting for the next train. Mathangi began telling me about her life, how she was here on a temporary work visa from India, and how happy she was. She was young, had beautiful dark eyes and elegant way of speaking that made her sound like a college professor. What I was reading led her to explain her own philosophy. Mathangi told me that her religious practices and values were very important to her, and that as part of her beliefs, she loved and respected everyone and supported their choices. She said the more she loved God, the more she loved everyone else. "Everything is God," she said. She made things sound so simple, you wondered why people fight over the details.

An announcement came over the loudspeaker. The next train, the 8:20 was cancelled. Mathangi and I had more time to talk and it seems we had a lot to say to each other. I explained that I was grateful and happy too. Two years before I had been in an accident where my car was dragged underneath a tractor trailer for 900 feet and no one who saw the accident expected me to be alive. During a long recovery period, I had gained new appreciation for my body and for my life. I told her that for the past 3 months I was starting to feel fewer physical limits and that I had gratitude for everything. That near-death experience had been transforming for me.

Finally, another train came and we got on it and sat next to each other. The only empty seat for two was in the back, without a window. It was odd, really, Mathangi and I were

## Library of Congress

sharing stories as if we were longtime friends. She told me she didn't always feel so comfortable at train stations. Eight months ago when she had just arrived from India, she was wearing a sari and a woman approached her and said, "Do you believe in those Indian gods?" "Yes," Mathangi said agreeably. The woman became angry, screaming "You're a witch and you will burn in Hell!" Mathangi got nervous and started backing against the wall. She stayed far away from the crazy woman until her train had come that day. She thought the woman was upset enough to harm her. After finishing her tale, Mathangi made light of the story and for some reason, we were both giggling a bit. I said, "Can you believe in this day and age that someone would want to harm you for how you worship God? It's absurd! It's so silly. It's hard to believe people like that exist!" Mathangi nodded in agreement.

The train was nearing Newark Penn Station, where I would then switch to a PATH train that would take me inside the World Trade Center. All of a sudden, I heard a sound that I had never heard human voices make before. The noises were a mix of surprise, revulsion and something else I still cannot name. Did the train car strike an animal? A person? People on the train were looking out the window and making the strangest noises. There weren't words spoken, just a rush of air being taken in and finally lots of "nooooooooooooo!"

I realize now that they had seen an airplane hit Tower Two of the World Trade Center. We went to the window and saw both towers on fire.

"I work there." I explained. I had tears in my eyes. My stomach was tight. "My friends are inside there. I've worked there about 12 years. My friends are there."

We had no idea what was happening. I was remembering how awful the bombing in 1993 was. Back then I was in the mail concourse, a few feet away from the glass entrance into Building One. About 70 feet away from me the bomb had blown out the wall and filled the air with thick dust as it shook the ground. Six people died that day. Looking at the towers, seeing the flames from across the Hudson River, I knew this was much worse than 1993

## Library of Congress

had ever been. The sight of all the smoke and flame filling the air made me shudder for those inside. I had no idea if everyone I worked with was gone or not. I kept hoping that like me, everyone was inexplicably late for work.

Mathangi looked at me and put her hand on my arm. "Do you feel bad because you are not there?" She looked steadily into my eyes, saying, "Do you not think that God knows where everyone is?" I thought about my colleagues. There were a lot of folks who came in early. Some had disabilities. But people could take a day off, be at meetings out of the office. People could be late like me. What if God had made everyone late that day? I sat there wishing every single person who worked there was late. That the towers were empty and silent. Maybe it could happen. The only person that I was certain was in the office was a colleague with whom I had compared schedules with the day before. He would be at his desk 7:30 for a meeting at 8. We made plans to attend a meeting out of the office in the early afternoon. He always offered to drive me to offsite meetings in a way that didn't make me feel foolish for still having driving fears. He'd always just say, "I'll drive, OK?" as if the thought just occurred to him. Surely he could just walk down the steps and he'd be fine, couldn't he?

In the train station Mathangi and I sat near the platform. People drifted up to us in a state of semi-shock. Most of them said "I work in the Trade Center but today I was late." We asked several of them to sit on the bench with us. I felt it was important to tell one woman that she was safe and had to sit with us. She just looked so lost. Mathangi lent me her cell phone. I called my mother and I had never heard such hysteria in Mom's voice. "I'm okay, Mom. I'm okay. Tell Sis. Let her know. I'll be home soon as I can. I love you." Mathangi passed her cell phone around to perfect strangers on the platform. People were saying the same things to the people they loved.

We caught the last train back home before they stopped the trains that morning. There was an eerie agitation as passengers were glued to their laptops and pagers and yelled things into the air to no one in particular. "Tower Two has fallen!" Fallen? Fallen? How

## Library of Congress

could Tower Two fall? They're just saying words and they don't know what they mean. How could it fall? This makes no sense. I just saw it, on fire. How could it fall?"

Mathangi started to talk to me, but she could see she wasn't reaching me. "I'm sorry," I said, "I hope I'm not rude ... but my friends ... my friends..."

"God is there helping them" she said.

The train stopped on the tracks. Everything stopped for a while. I think, officials were stopping service and trying to decide what to do about trains en route. The Pentagon's been hit!

Hit? The Pentagon? How? With another airplane? Who would do this?

Tower One has fallen! Fallen? It just couldn't. How could it do that? These Towers were built to last. They were always so strong and solid. What could make them crumble? Was everyone gone?

It's a few months later and so many are gone. Twelve from the Department where I worked never returned home. But they were people I knew, people I was used to seeing. I didn't know the smiling security guard who stood all day greeting visitors near the elevators had a pregnant wife and four children. I read it in his obituary.

Oddly, there are two things I remember most about those I knew who were killed: their kindness and their humor. The thing I remember about several of the Port Authority Police officers I knew who are gone is how easily they could tell a joke and change your mood. I remember laughter, but also generosity and goodness. There was a colleague who would always drop everything to help. Another was conscientious. There was one woman who would talk to me as we brushed our hair in the Ladies' Room mirror about work or clothes or what was happening in the department. One spoke to me of practically nothing else but her children. The only person I was certain was in the building is gone, too. The floor I had

## Library of Congress

worked on, Tower 1, 64 North was a floor that mostly comprised people whose jobs are to keep tunnel and bridge roadways operating safely and effectively. At his burial site, I looked up at the sky and saw a lone hawk lazily gliding overhead in long slow circles. The natural world had appeared to pay its respects. In some Native American lore, hawks are known as protectors of the roadways. I think he would have liked that.

I drove Mathangi home on September 11; she didn't have a car at the station. I thanked her for being there to hold my hand. I had felt as if God had sent someone very gentle and sweet to help me through that terrible day. When I got home, I retraced what had happened in my mind, down to the smallest detail. It was then I had remembered the text that had caused Mathangi to talk to me in the first place. The essay I was reading was exploring an aphorism I'd heard my whole life and still struggle with. It was: "Forgive them, they know not what they do."